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# A "Tenderfoot" in a Prairie Fire.

BY RALPH STOCK, OF MAPLE CREEK, ASSINIBOIA, CANADA.

Arriving at a little prairie station an absolute "tenderfoot" or greenhorn, the author had not been in the place an hour when he was seized upon by the local "fire-guardian" to go and help fight a dangerous prairie fire ten miles away. The experience was a novel and most exciting one. When things were at their worst and the fire-fighters were being driven back, a providential downpour of rain extinguished the conflagration and saved a threatened homestead.



HOPELESS, palpable "tenderfoot," and painfully aware of the fact, I arrived, bag and baggage, at Maple Creek, a ranching centre in the North-West Territories of Canada,

after a more or less uncomfortable journey of some 6,000 miles.

There were no porters to seize my traps as I stood on the tiny platform, feeling, and I'm sure looking, like the proverbial fish out of water; no cries of "Cab, sir?"—simply silence.

At first I thought I was the only occupant of that platform, dumped down, as it were, on the wide-spreading prairie, and looking for all the world like a disused packing-case turned upside down. On looking round, however, I discovered a short, thick-set man, with a face the colour of red ochre, surmounted by a stiff, wide-brimmed felt hat, the crown of which was decorated with four dents at opposite angles. A gay-coloured scarf, tied

in a tight knot, adorned his neck, and a black leather jacket, dark blue linen trousers, turned up at least 4in., revealing high-heeled riding boots and spurs, completed his costume.

At last! This must be a real live cowboy. I was at once deeply interested, and I'm afraid my scrutiny must have been anything but timid,

for, to my astonishment, he walked straight up to me.

"Anything I can do, stranger?" he said, in a friendly tone, accompanied with a broad grin that was vastly reassuring, though it rather annoyed me. Why do Westerners always grin

at Easterners, especially newly-arrived ones? Since then I have found out, and I'm afraid I do it myself.

"No, thanks," I said, and then changed my mind. "Well," I added, "I was just wondering if I could find a porter, or someone, to carry my bag to the hotel."

"Gee! a porter!" he exclaimed. "Here, give me your grip."

Of course, I thought he wanted to shake hands with me, and couldn't quite see the connection; but he explained matters by catching up my handbag, swinging it on to his shoulder, and starting off in the direction of a gloomy-looking log structure across the road.

He deposited his burden inside the door, and with a gruff "There you are, pard," was about to walk away when, like the ignorant idiot I was, I produced a "quarter" and held it out to him.

It struck me he was unusually dense, for he stared stolidly for a second or two with a look



"'ANYTHING I CAN DO, STRANGER?' HE SAID."

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that seemed to say, "I suppose the poor creature can't help it," and finally turned on his heel, with a queer smile in the corner of his mouth. I grasped the situation just in time. "Well, you'll have a drink, then?" I suggested, humbly.

"Thanks," he said, in a mollified tone, and we approached the bar.

I learnt many things about Western

little man appeared, dressed in the usual rancher's costume. He was rather breathless and perspiring freely.

"Fire south of Pie Pot Creek," he shouted; "wind rising; all turn out!" and then made for the bar.

There was an instant stir in the assembled crowd. Some made for the door, some loitered, unwilling to move. The latter were summarily



"'FIRE SOUTH OF PIE POT CREEK,' HE SHOUTED."

etiquette at that bar; among other items I collected was the fact that a man with a "white wall round his neck" (*Anglicè*, collar) is in no way superior to one who wears a light blue scarf with yellow spots. It was also a relief to know that my new friend had excused my initial error on account of my extreme youth and ignorance.

There were many faces in that bar-room, all weather-beaten and brown, and all bearing the unmistakable stamp of good-nature. They belonged to a crowd of cowboys, "broncho-busters," and ranchmen from a hundred miles round, and a more jovial, rough-tongued, but thoroughly good-hearted community one could not meet.

My companion and I got in a quiet part and discussed the war. Our interests were mutual, for we discovered that we both had brothers in the same regiment at the front, and we were getting on famously when suddenly the door opened abruptly and an insignificant-looking

dealt with. "Turn out; you know the penalty!" said the new arrival, sternly.

One by one they obeyed the summons; some cheerfully, others grumbling.

"Are you going to turn out?" asked the perspiring little man, addressing me.

"Where?" I asked, lamely.

He must have seen I was a "tenderfoot," for he was merciful, though short.

"There's a prairie fire way out south of Pie Pot Creek," he explained. "I'm a fire-guardian, and it's my duty to fetch anyone within ten miles to fight it. If they refuse there's a penalty of 50dols. to pay. You can get a lift in a police waggon if you haven't a horse. Now skip!"

At this point he took a deep draught of beer and heaved a sigh as if of relief at having disposed of his stock oration.

I looked helplessly for my companion. He had vanished. Outside the door, however, I saw his face, smiling as ever at my approach.

"You're let in for it, pard—and your first night up West, too!" he remarked, sympathetically. "You'd better come with me; I can borrow a 'cayuse' and a saddle for you."

In less than a quarter of an hour we were in the saddle, alternately loping and trotting over the prairie towards a red glare which showed far away on the southern horizon.

My interest was now fully aroused, and even the uncertain movements of my Indian-bred "cayuse" could not baffle me.

"W—what starts a pr—prairie fire?" I inquired, between the back-breaking jolts, as

we trotted along. My friend, like most cowboys, was full of

information, and not in the least loth to part with it, for which I was relieved, as, for my own part, talking was a matter that needed no little management.

"Oh, lots of things," he replied, in an unshaken voice that might have proceeded from the recesses of a deep arm-chair. "The sparks from an engine, you know, ashes from a pipe, or a match thrown away while it is still glowing. Why, I've known even the sparks from a horse's shoe striking a stone to start a fire! But lightning starts more fires than anything else—not an ordinary storm, but just lightning and thunder without rain. We often get them out here."

By this time we had

brought our steeds to a walk, and I could speak with less difficulty.

"Do you get paid at all for turning out like this?"

"Not a cent," was the prompt reply; "but you have to pay 50dols. if you don't. You may spoil all your clothes trying to fight a fire, and yet you get nothing back. It's the worst job in the country. It makes you wish you were a doctor or a chemist for a week—they don't have to turn out, you know. But you'll learn all you want to of prairie fires to-night."

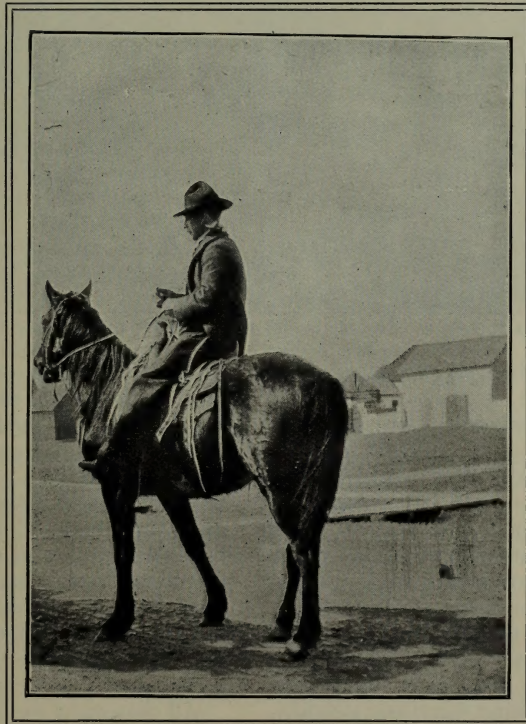
We loped on, passing police wagons filled with willing helpers, single men on horseback, and a few unfortunates on foot, all making for that sinister red patch that grew brighter every minute.

The wind was rising, and the air was slowly becoming more and more smoke-laden. My companion looked annoyingly comfortable, sitting there for all the world as though in a rocking-chair, while I swayed from side to side, with my trousers—contrary to all the laws of gravitation—slowly working up my leg in a most irritating fashion.

Flames were now discernible, flickering out through huge billows of black smoke. A faint crackling, too, could be heard, growing louder and louder till it merged into a dull roar, and soon we saw figures running hither and thither,



From a] THE AUTHOR, WITH THE HORSE HE RODE TO THE FIRE. [Photo.



From a] THE "FIRE-GUARDIAN" OF MAPLE CREEK. [Photo.

silhouetted blackly against a blood-red background.

At last we came to a sudden stop, my "cayuse" halting almost simultaneously with my companion's, and nearly shooting me over the "horn" of the saddle.

After dismounting I found myself gazing at the proceedings in a dazed sort of way, while my companion, with practised fingers, hastily tethered our two steeds to a police waggon. Then he took a long oil-skin coat from behind his saddle.

"Haven't you got a 'slicker'?" he remarked. "You'd better see what you can get in the waggon." And he disappeared into the smoke.

I made for a little group of men with

beat and beat at the running lines of fire with my improvised mop till my arms felt like parting company with my body. Every now and then I would beat a retreat, running to the waggon and wetting my mop in a barrel of water that was kept filled from a creek three miles away by a couple of industrious teamsters who had been commandeered, with their waggons, by the zealous "fire-guardian." Once I was so absorbed with my mopping that I was nearly run down by a couple of horsemen, one on each side of the line of fire, who were galloping along pell-mell, dragging between them a wet cow-hide loaded down with chains. They again were closely followed by a crowd of beaters waiting



"I WAS NEARLY RUN DOWN BY A COUPLE OF HORSEMEN, ONE ON EACH SIDE OF THE LINE OF FIRE."

blackened and perspiring faces, who soon supplied my wants.

"Here, take this," said one. He thrust a stick into my hand. Round the end of this stick several sacks soaked with water had been wound. "You'll find more water in the waggon," added the man.

There were about twenty men at the fire when I arrived, but now the numbers were rapidly increasing and soon there were at least forty, all tramping and beating for dear life, but apparently in vain. The fire spread like spilt quicksilver. The thick prairie grass came up to my knees in places, and the wind was rising steadily, fanning the flames in an alarming fashion. I

eagerly for a spark or flame to escape the hide to thrash it into submission with "slickers," mops, sacks, old saddle-blankets, and even hats.

By this time, "green" though I was, I was scorched black and perspiring freely, but the fire still spread inexorably. It was now ten miles long, and had left ten miles of burnt and blackened prairie in its wake. It seemed hopeless to attempt to keep it back, and after a final "whack" at a flame that promptly seemed to increase instead of diminishing, I gave up in despair and joined the ever-increasing number of exhausted "sitters-out."

All that night we fought the flames—an hour at work, sometimes two, and then five minutes'



“IN TEN MINUTES A ‘FIRE-GUARD’ OF FOUR FURROWS WAS CUT AROUND IT.”

rest—until I thought I should have dropped dead from fatigue. Once the fire approached a haystack. A plough was promptly produced from a waggon, and in ten minutes a “fire-guard” of four furrows was cut around it by four horses and two men working at a hand-gallop. A small gully filled with brush next fell a victim. The dry branches crackled and roared furiously as the fire ran up them and passed relentlessly on, leaving nothing but blackened stumps behind.

It soon became apparent to everybody that if the wind did not change an adjacent stockman’s ranch would be the next thing to be destroyed. Of course, it would be protected with a “fire-guard” of, perhaps, seven furrows; but what is that to a fire that will sometimes leap a well-worn trail 12ft. wide? Needless to say, the owner of the ranch was with us, and I shall never forget with what frenzied energy the poor fellow fought to save his home, beating at the cruel flames like a man possessed. But, thank Heaven, the wind was decreasing—almost imperceptibly, it is true, but still enough to put fresh vigour into our aching bodies.

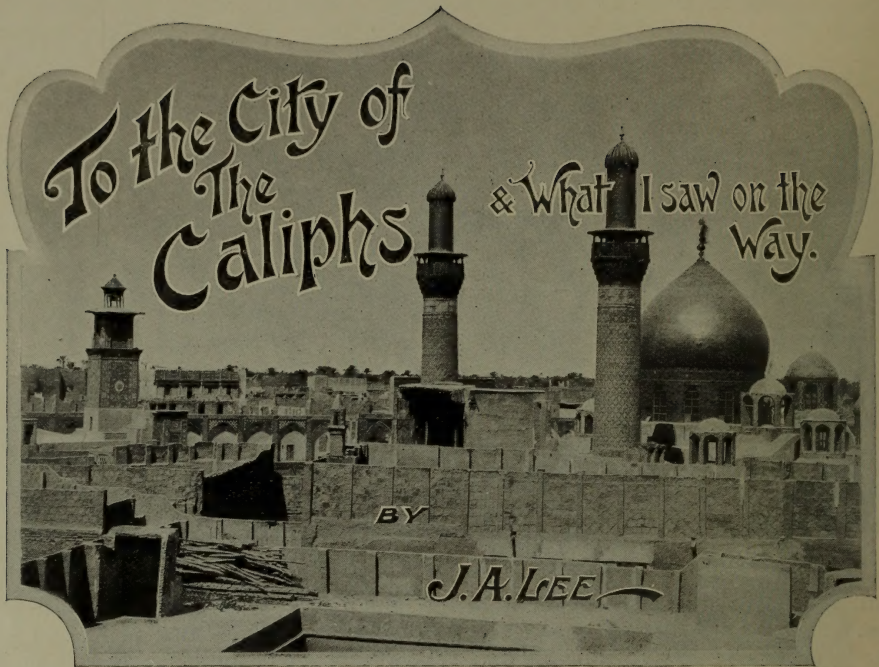
Sometimes a fire will travel at fifty miles an hour, and no other alternative is left to a person on foot than to jump the “fire line”—the area that is actually burning—a distance of several feet, and land on the charred grass beyond. He is then obliged to do a little more jumping until the ground grows cool enough for him to stand

still on. No one was compelled to resort to this appalling practice that night, and I was somewhat relieved, for it did not look inviting.

Suddenly, as I worked, I felt something wet splash upon my forehead. Of course, it must be a drop of water from the mop, I thought, and I continued my thrashing in the mechanical sort of way I had acquired during the last few hours. But another splash came, and another; then they came quickly, one after another. I had been too intent upon my work to take note of the sky before; but now I looked up and saw that it was black with clouds. Nearly everyone was resting from his work and gazing intently and anxiously at the sky. Rain! Yes, thank Heaven! it was coming at last, and we hailed it with grateful hearts, for it is the only certain quencher of a prairie fire.

I say it rained; but it did not. It simply fell down in solid sheets of water, and in less than five minutes the fire was over. Nature had accomplished in that short space of time what the hand of man had failed to do in a night and half a day. And the stockman realized with a bursting heart that his cherished home was saved.

There was no smoke and no flame left—only one black pall covering the prairie farther than the eye could reach. But in less than a week after its destruction that same black waste was green again, such is the richness of this wonderful prairie soil.



The author describes his journey from Bussorah to Baghdad, through the land of the "Arabian Nights." He has much to say concerning the curious sights and scenes to be met with in this romantic region, the traditional site of the Garden of Eden, and where are to be seen the foundations of the Tower of Babel, the tomb of the prophet Ezra, and the ruins of Babylon the Glorious.



River trips can present more fascinating features than that up the Tigris from the port of Bussorah—the Al Bassora of Sindbad the Sailor—to Baghdad, the famous city of the Caliphs. Gradually as in a panorama there will be unfolded before us that wonderful belt of date gardens which for many miles fringes either bank; the traditional site of the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge; and the tomb of Ezra the prophet. The vast mounds of brick and pottery to the south-west of Baghdad will recall the vanished glories of Babylon, with its hanging gardens, terraced temples, and palace that was the admiration of the world; and the first view of the minarets and palms of Baghdad will revive our recollection of the Caliph Haroun-al-Raschid and the worthies of the "Arabian Nights." Those who are less susceptible to the glamour of historical associations will probably share in the widespread interest which the proposed German Baghdad Railway scheme has created in commercial and

political circles, for that section coming within the scope of this paper, *i.e.*, the section joining the Tigris at Mosul and skirting the river from Baghdad to Bussorah, is justly considered to be the most important and the one more nearly calculated to affect British commerce than any other portion of this great railway scheme.

Leaving the sea steamer at the port of Bussorah, some forty to fifty miles up the Shat-el-Arab, we went on board one of the smart river steamers of the Euphrates and Tigris Company, admirably adapted, both in carrying capacity and draught, for the special requirements of the river traffic. The weather was extremely hot, but somewhat tempered by the "shimal," or north-west wind. We passed rapidly up the river, past the date gardens, past the wonderful creeks or canals which, made by the Arabs when at the zenith of their power, still serve to irrigate a great belt of country and transform into a prolific and prosperous country what would otherwise be a bleak and sterile desert.

I must say a few words here about the date-





